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ABSTRACT

Although private industry has been decentralizing for the past decade, community colleges have been slow to follow. For those colleges that have decentralized, traditional structured planning methodologies do not apply. The focus of strategic planning efforts at decentralized institutions is on the development of strategic themes to which individuals, empowered to use their own creativity, respond. While a formal model for planning in a decentralized institution would inhibit change and be counterproductive, the following ideas can be taken into consideration: (1) an institution must analyze its own identity and functions, rather than rely too heavily on ideas from the corporate sector; (2) routine processes ought to be re-engineered only when appropriate; (3) institutions must buy into the notion of wide-scale collaboration; (4) evolution is normal and is the outcome of decentralized strategic planning; (5) college members must be willing to yield to broader concerns even as they recognize that institutional interests sometimes conflict with their own; (6) an ongoing planning process is desirable and necessary; (7) there must be a large and widely shared information base; (8) planners should avoid limiting recommendations based on perceptions of the resources likely to become available; and (9) barriers within the existing structure should be razed and leveled. Since 1989, Virginia's Blue Ridge Community College has experimented with a decentralized approach, and the first decentralized strategic plan was published in 1991. Although application of the plan has been uneven, the college community has supported the plan and has been optimistic. (Contains 14 references.) (KP)

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Strategic Planning in a Decentralized Environment: The Death of Linearity

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Abstract:

Most community colleges are faced with budget woes and increased demand for a broad range of expensive services. Pressure for accountability is also escalating. Neither these nor many other pressures are likely to abate quickly. Colleges are being forced to change how they are organized, how they plan, and what they try to achieve. This paper focuses on coping behavior in a rather small subset of community colleges — those that are highly decentralized.

Although private industry has been decentralizing, restructuring, and re-engineering with a vengeance for the past decade, colleges have been very slow to follow. The typical college structure is not notably different from what it was two decades ago. The average institution has fewer people and more computers. In most cases that means colleges are doing the same things faster without necessarily new communication patterns. In most institutions, planning and other traditional organizational functions are still tightly controlled by people at the top of the hierarchy.

Some colleges, however, have embraced change. They have decentralized, formed functional work groups, and markedly altered their governance structures. In such colleges, traditional structured planning methodologies simply do not apply. We propose a very different way to look at planning, one which builds on the strengths of decentralized institutions. For illustrative purposes, we describe the experience of Blue Ridge Community College (BRCC).

BRCC, for the first 17 years of its existence, was highly traditional and centralized. Beginning about a decade ago, the school decentralized most of its core functions. Foremost has been the decentralization of planning. Until a decade ago, the only planning at the institution was done by the president. For the past five years, however, the "Planning Committee" has been a standing committee whose members are elected by faculty, classified staff, and administrators. With few, if any, exceptions the president and other administrators have implemented the proposals developed by the planning committee.

All is not perfect. Along the way we have learned to cherish iteration, nonlinearity, and a sort of collegial chaos that has literally frightened some visitors as well as members of the college community. We have also learned how to conventionalize routine tasks so we can get them out of the way of people who are thinking about more challenging processes. We are learning how to manage brief interludes of revolution in a climate of evolutionary change, to help people cope in times of uncertainty, to get concrete thinkers to think in abstract terms, to relish (or at least endure) organizational change, and to develop information flow to support the above.

In the present paper, we offer some suggestions for the structure of planning. The planning structure itself must evolve as an integral part of the process of planning. Some treasured practices such as linear and sub-cycle based processes should be reduced or abandoned. Planning must be continuous rather than episodic, inclusive rather than isolating, and nurturing of change rather than defensive of tradition. Centralized planning is anachronistic.

New Element Discovered

(Author Unknown)

The heaviest element known to science was recently discovered by materials researchers at IPRT/ISU. The new element, tentatively named *Administratium*, has no protons or electrons, and thus has an atomic weight of 0. However, it does have one neutron, 125 assistant neutrons, 75 vice-neutrons, and 111 assistant vice-neutrons. This gives it an atomic mass of 312. These 312 particles are held together in a nucleus by a force that involves the continuous exchange of particles called morons.

Since it has no electrons, *Administratium* is totally inert. However, it can be detected chemically, since it impedes every reaction with which it comes into contact. According to its discoverers, a tiny amount of *Administratium* caused one reaction to take over four days to complete, the normal reaction time being less than one second.

Administratium has a normal half-life of approximately three years, at which time it does not actually decay, but instead undergoes a reorganization in which neutrons, vice-neutrons and assistant vice-neutrons exchange places. Studies have shown that the atomic mass usually increases after each reorganization.

Research at other laboratories indicates that *Administratium* occurs naturally in the atmosphere. It tends to concentrate at certain points, such as government agencies, large corporations, and universities. It is always found in the newest, best appointed and best maintained buildings.

Scientists point out that *Administratium* is known to be toxic at any level of concentration and thus can easily destroy any productive reactions where it is allowed to accumulate. Attempts are being made to determine how *Administratium* can be controlled to prevent irreversible damage, but results to date are not promising.

Introduction

Strategic planning in a decentralized institution requires that colleges establish an environment, including a culture, supportive of change. Because effective strategic planning must be ongoing as opposed to episodic, colleges must view change as the norm. The context in which the modern community college must function creates "a growing need for flexibility, which is driven by the rapid pace of change. In order to be responsive to their markets, organizations must have the capability of retooling quickly" (Roueche, Taber & Roueche, 1995, p.37).

"The massive introduction of workplace technology has already resulted in significant changes in organizational structure and relationships. It is unreasonable to assume that such significant changes can be made without a high degree of individual and organizational trauma" (Brown, 1995, p. 1). Brown was referring to industry — unfortunately, college organizational structures have only recently begun to change. "I can't wait until things get back to normal!', a colleague exclaimed as we left yet another gloomy meeting about the Virginia budget. 'You're missing the point' another replied. 'This is normal'" (Davies, 1994, p.3). Many others agree with Mingle's idea (1995, p. 9) that, "With higher education as the biggest discretionary item in state budgets, it will [continue to be] be an irresistible target in the budget-cutting process."

"Despite much talk on campuses about the need to 'prepare for the 21st century' by emulating industry and becoming more flexible and responsive to change, colleges and universities adopt innovation very slowly . . . . In general, there is surprisingly little correlation between the characteristics of institutions and the speed at which they adopted innovations, just as there is little correlation between the characteristics of the innovations themselves and the speed at which they were accepted. Innovation in higher education seems to be almost random" (Siegfried, Getz & Anderson, 1995, A-56). Siegfried et al. suggest selective reinforcement of administrators for producing successful

innovations. That is the opposite of what happens in most institutions -- change threatens punishment, while stability is rewarded. We believe that most institutions actively inhibit change, to their detriment. Institutions need not respond to each flash in the pan, but on the other hand they cannot forever watch the world pass them by. Most of the re-engineering which has already taken place in higher education has been in administrative processes, while (protestations to the contrary notwithstanding) the core functions of teaching, service, and research are nearly untouched (e.g., Pritchett, 1995; Guskin, 1994).

Colleges and Universities in general are at a defining moment as modern workable institutions. ". . . by and large, we have made most of the 'simple' changes our current ivory tower model is likely to accept. The big task in front of us is to lead our educational enterprises in the difficult work of making major changes in core business process — teaching and learning" (Heterick, 1995, p. 60).

Institutions with the most clearly defined and hierarchical structures may be those which find it most difficult to lead and respond in a world of rapid change. They will be handicapped by their own structure, in both internal and external relationships. This state of affairs has proven the rule rather than the exception. For example, "Institutions that start with clean, well-defined lines of authority in a hierarchical organizational chart have a tendency to exhibit 'anti-stochastic' behavior over time. What was once a departmental exercise of authority gradually becomes subject to mandates and restrictions from other departments. Gradually, the hierarchical nature of the organization is lost, and along with it the capability for initiative at the level of operating units" (Harbort, 1995, B-3).

Other than rigid and steep hierarchies, why have colleges and universities been so slow to react? The most frequently mentioned reason for institutional intransigence is that the funding available to most public (and many private) institutions has become more restricted. However, we believe funding limitations are more often an excuse than a reason. Indeed, radical funding depletions can be used by institutions as catalysts for restructuring, an opportunity to seize the day. Another

commonly heard whine refers to "entrenched faculty" and rigid requirements of both students and institutions. We see these, too, as cop-outs. Rigid requirements can be worked around or changed and entrenched faculty can be led out of the trenches. We believe that it is the very nature of traditional hierarchies that is the most significant barrier to change. It is the character of linear inflexible structures to resist change. Leadership becomes "turf protective" and even the concept of change in a microcosm can be perceived as a threat. Administrators often become part of the problem instead of part of the solution. "In fact, a search of the literature on administrative productivity in education uncovers precious little to review . . . . To what extent is the success of the institution attributable to the efforts of administrators?" (Venditti, 1995, p. 2). Siegfried et al. (1995) indicate that innovation is random with respect to institutional characteristics and Venditti (1995) suggests we do not know how administrators contribute to institutional innovation (if, indeed, they do at all). Given the current state of economics and politics, this is a dangerous situation for higher education.

Some broad changes in our society make traditional hierarchies even more untenable. "The power, proliferation, complexity, and cost of today's information technology and resources suggests that traditional working relationships are inadequate to meet this challenge. Instead, new collaborative relationships are needed" (Creth, 1995, p. 15). She argues that the notion of hierarchy becomes irrelevant in virtual organization, that information technology has a leveling effect, and that virtuality reduces the inertia (resistance to change) found in traditional structures — the very term 'structure' seems antithetic to virtuality. Virtuality implies brief but purposeful horizontal organizations. In contrast, even team-based organizations seem rigid and hide-bound.

"One might observe that networks of distributed intelligence were bound to win out over centralized systems. We have long been aware of the Square Law of Complexity — the complexity of a system increases at least as fast as the square of the number of tightly coupled components.

It is this Law that helps us understand why we can't build hugely complex centralized software systems, and why distributing the intelligence decouples the relations, thereby reducing the intellectual and computational labor necessary to understand and build them" (Heterick, 1995, p. 60).

Why we need effective planning in a more decentralized approach

Change in a higher education institution always takes two forms: revolutionary and evolutionary. Radical changes made by administrators facing mandates often times are revolutionary in that they can change the structure of the college. On the other hand, evolutionary change occurs in the day to day process of the institution in response to gradual changes in the environment. Evolutionary changes occur regardless of whether an institution plans strategically. Effective strategic planning depends on a widely shared understanding that these changes do occur, and that they can be predicted. An institution must develop means to predict the nature of those changes and manage both revolutionary and evolutionary change.

Change in any institution will take time to accept and get accustomed to. Evolutionary change is bound by existing structures whereas revolutionary change is inherently centralized. Therefore, revolutionary centralized change creates new structures so that evolutionary development and implementation of themes can occur. The action of strategic planning is, then, by definition, an evolutionary process, both as to product and to the process itself. A plan that sets out every action to be taken by an institution over X number of years will not only be irrelevant in short order but runs the risk of transforming short term vision into long term mission.

Revolutionary change will always have the most immediate effect on an institution and must flow from administration. Effective planning means that when a college president makes a revolutionary change the college community understands that change, buys into the process and initiates evolutionary conversions to support revolutionary change. Obviously, this is easier said than done.

Trauma in an environment of change is a constant. Thus the process of planning should be entered into gradually. The challenge is to mitigate

the potential for trauma so all members of the college community can focus on abstract principles of effective change rather than concrete negative reactions to change. Numerous problems will emerge in even the most effective planning institutions. It is necessary to accept that these problems will occur and prepare the institution for them. It is unrealistic to assume that an institution can ever achieve 100% buy-in to change. For example, when abstract ideas become strategic direction (the immediate product of strategic planning) many people in the college community will respond by asking "How does this affect me?" If the response is "We don't know yet" (as is likely) the next response may well be a defensive "tell me what to do".

The key to reducing this kind of defensive posture is to generate broad ownership of evolutionary change at all levels of the college. If a college generates a broad sense of ownership, it creates a culture that embraces change. Embracing change does engender a modicum of risk, however. In a rational yet traditional world there would be an inverse relationship between accountability and willingness to assume risk. By encouraging input and activity at all institutional levels, that inverse relationship is minimized. In other words, is it possible for an institution that values and encourages change at all levels to get carried away? The risks of producing a positive culture of change are far out-weighed by the costs of stagnation in a changing world.

We believe that decentralization is crucial to successful strategic planning. However, it is important to recognize that decentralization comes with other costs. "One by-product of the information explosion is the loss of privacy" (Eder, 1994, p.38). Privacy and the related concept of confidentiality are inevitable casualties of a decentralized and team-oriented environment. Turf protection is destroyed by this type of restructuring. Restructuring has this effect because one can hide in and defend most easily that area which one holds in isolation. A team orientation makes such isolation difficult since teams require interdependence.

A decentralized institution described

On the surface, a community college using a decentralized approach to planning and governance may not look much different from other organizations using a more centralized approach. Its organizational structure provides few clues indicating it is anything but typical. Its approach to routine institutional processes could seem bureaucratic and centralized. Decentralized institutions can be traditionally organized for the purpose of maintaining tight control over routine recurring tasks. The casual observer of these institutions judges them as "nicely run." The bills are paid on time, there are few audit exceptions, employees and students are generally happy, and the balance sheet looks good.

But while all is calm and efficient for routine tasks, chaos reigns internally. Observing the governance process and the planning committee meetings, visitors (and some members of the college community including administrators) wonder if anyone is running the institution. Planning at these institutions is continuous, evolving and chaotic. It is led by faculty, staff and administration with support and guidance from the president. Strategic planning at the decentralized institution is driven by values and by an institutional vision developed by the planning committee and adopted by the entire institution. The process is fed by the continual flow of an ever expanding information base that includes the office of institutional research, the community, and pertinent literature from a variety of fields including higher education.

The focus of strategic planning efforts is on the development of strategic themes. Individuals, empowered to use their own creativity, respond to those themes. This is where the governance structure comes into play. Members of a cultural affairs committee, for example, might help the institution learn to value diversity and scholarship, explore new ideas, and promote creative thought. Members of the curriculum committee should ask how programs model the use of technology, function to improve understanding, develop structures to improve connections between the content of the curriculum and the needs of the community,

and challenge existing programs in light of changing demographics and changing employer needs. Individuals and organizational units find their place in the process by developing initiatives that respond to the strategic themes.

Administrators become facilitators, enablers, and sometimes "pinch-hitters" when players are unwilling to step up to the plate. But the latter is rare. When an individual lets his colleagues down, self-policing is the most common practice. The decentralized institution ensures that everyone has the information and tools to make significant recommendations and decisions. It promotes creativity, rewards efforts to improve, and celebrates together its successes. It views failure as a learning experience and a challenge, even an opportunity to do better next time. As a result, hiding is difficult; since it is essential to share information, most people know or can easily find out what their colleagues throughout the institution are doing.

Information Services

A wide variety of forces for change intrude on the institution. Understanding these forces is crucial for institutional success; they must be understood by many players, not solely by administrators. In a decentralized planning environment, information must be distributed widely, and in a user-friendly manner.

In most higher education institutions, however, offices responsible for data collection and information dispersion often work in isolated, redundant, and ineffective ways. Consider the office of institutional research (IR), the library, the assessment office, and the college computing center. These units often contain resources which, if coordinated, could facilitate the collection and distribution of information in a manner that supports the college's planning environment. Detached as they often are, their information collection and dissemination is burdensome and not user oriented.

Consider the synergies that could be developed if, for instance, the reference librarian, the institutional researcher, and the computer technician worked as a team to find, process, and disseminate information for the campus community to support curriculum development, budget planning, and environmental scanning. Issues about what information is in what reports, how to access those reports, how to use the internet to find other models, and how to use the research tools available to complete a literature search could all be resolved using the coordinated talents and individual perspectives of these experts.

The focus of a decentralized planning model should be on the liberation of information. By isolating individuals with special skills in information collection from each other, we help to perpetuate the isolation of knowledge from the campus community.

Colleges considering a decentralized approach to planning should consider establishing information services units which draw resources from these traditionally isolated offices. The focus of these units must be on gathering and disseminating information to the campus community in support of ongoing planning efforts. These units must be organized to support others as they gather and process information. There must be training facilitators who help others identify sources, then help provide the tools to gather and interpret information. It is important to note that a planning committee and a variety of campus user groups will help organize and prioritize the work of these information units; the president and other administrators participate with the rest of the institutional community as peers in this process.

Based on the above discussion, we believe the traditional role of the IR office is obsolete. Clerical report generation for external agencies will still be necessary. The institutional researcher's talents, however, will be applied primarily to teaching peers and sharing information and skills. Played out properly, the institutional researcher's role will blend with that of research librarian to provide a crucial service for the entire institution. In effect, the institutional researcher will enjoy a much more

dynamic role, higher profile and greater security within the decentralized institution than it ever had in the traditional institution.

The role of the president

A president must accept the spirit of a decentralized institution otherwise the entire process is moot, and what is needed is a new president. The president of a college that adopts a decentralized approach to planning and decision making accepts burdens and ambiguities often not present in more traditionally organized institutions. There is of course potential for carryover from a centralized model. Everyday functions must proceed and the president still must ensure that work is done efficiently and effectively without error. Bills must be paid, board meetings must be organized, students must be registered, and classes must be scheduled. These items constitute important but routine tasks of any college. However, the president concerned only with the efficient conduct of routine business will not be successful in a decentralized institution.

In a decentralized institution, the effective president articulates institutional values, provides input to vision, helps to clarify the mission, serves as an ambassador and empowers others. To the public, the institution appears to run like a well oiled machine, but insiders know that when it comes to planning and institutional governance, processes are often chaotic. Assumptions about how things are done are challenged, new ideas are offered and debated, and recommendations are forged. The president is the whipless ringmaster in a three-ring circus. His only tools are his intellect, sensitivity, and vision.

In a decentralized planning and decision making environment, the president becomes a player/coach. He is part of the process and can wear many hats but he can not dominate. By sharing insights, suggesting professional resources, and ensuring that everyone participates, the president leads the process and achieves results that

would be impossible in more traditional structures.

The plan and the decisions derived from it become the work of the college, not of the administration. The planning process must not exclude administrators and the president but when the plan is being formulated everyone checks their titles at the door. As a result, everyone works to help achieve the desired outcomes. The president's job is to help facilitate the direction and the priorities that flow fr m the process, ensuring that everyone understands that sometimes direct action must be taken by the president if desired results are to be achieved. Even in a decentralized environment the president is sometimes the only individual who can initiate an institutional change reflecting the work of the planning process. Visionary presidents know when to let processes run their course (evolution) and when process has become stagnant and action at the top level must be taken (revolution). It is a difficult wire to walk. Clearly, the successful president in a decentralized institution must possess both sensitivity and a sense of timing.

An approach to a model

Fundamentally, planning in a decentralized institution is less about structure and resources and more about the battle for people's minds. Successful planning occurs when people learn to avoid formal structure in order to relate or communicate with each other despite rigid hierarchy. But patent structure is necessary for sanctifying the obvious and ongoing routine mechanics. Planning is a mindset. It cannot follow a rigid, step-by-step flow charted process because it requires a predisposition on the part of individuals and the institution to take risks. In decentralized planning as in most other activities, playing defensive ball is usually a loser. The upside is that risk-takers win if they follow the ideas outlined below.

To produce a formal model for this process would be counterproductive because a formal model is, by nature, a change inhibitor. Therefore,

what follows are some ideas about the planning process that must be customized to the values and environment of individual institutions.

1. An institution must analyze its own identity, determine what it is set up to do, ask if that is appropriate and how well we do it? "The standard basic question is 'What business are we in?' Another is 'Are we actually doing what we say we do?'" (Clowes, 1995, p.14).

   It is important that a college understand that the corporate world can lend it ideas, but such ideas are insufficient and sometimes inappropriate for an educational institution. "An educational institution is about values—that is what separates colleges from factories. We 'produce' student credit hours, but those are just the marks in the sand that we use for accounting and credentialing convenience. What education institutions provide is more than the data dust left in transcripts and grade books" (Clowes, 1995, p.14).

2. An institution should not include in the strategic planning process consideration of routine functions that work already and for which value added is unlikely — there is plenty other planning to do. Routine processes ought to be documented and performed reliably, then re-engineered when evaluation indicates change would be appropriate. For example, how one should run a graduation ceremony should not be grist for the strategic planning mill — a graduation ceremony is a routine activity. It is of narrow scope and an activity rather than a strategic direction. The planning focus should be on principles, themes, and strategic directions. In the initial stages of planning, the present status of the institution should be disregarded. People should not be handed an excuse to protect turf.

3. An institution must buy into the notion of widescale collaboration for strategic planning to produce change. All members of the college community must understand that their ideas and role in the process are essential. "Collaboration is not linear, it is not deterministic, and it is not a business as usual process. It differs significantly from both communication and cooperation" (Schrage, 1990, p.19). Collaboration

is mandatory for the processes of evolutionary and revolutionary change. An institution cannot achieve these effects using a centralized model.

4. Evolution is normal, iterative, and is the output of decentralized strategic planning. However, in the life of an institution there is occasionally a need for revolution, as a means to produce more dramatic and rapid change. Revolution in a decentralized institution, e.g., massive restructuring, must come from the president. Committees would not be likely to get the job done in a reasonable time (and perhaps not in a reasonable way). However, intensive and extensive prior consultation is still vital if alienation is to be avoided. One caveat is vital — even revolutionary changes must have a logical connection to the institution's strategic planning process and have significant buy-in by players at all institutional levels. Revolutionary change must be exercised with great restraint — presidents will be tempted to use it as a way to short-circuit the sometimes tedious and contentious decentralized planning process. In yielding too often to this understandable temptation, they doom both strategic planning and their own presidencies.

5. The players must value the institution, and be willing to yield to broader concerns even as they recognize that sometimes institutional interests conflict with their own. A significant number of players in all segments of the institution must have the ability to see beyond their own realms — narrowness of scope foredooms decentralized planning.

6. An ongoing planning process is both desirable and necessary. Many institutions stop planning when the strategic plan is published. The successful institution, on the other hand, recognizes that publication of the strategic plan simply begins a new cycle in a highly iterative and eternal process.

7. Planning is driven by information. Therefore, if planning is to be broadly based, there must be a large and widely shared information base. This means that some traditional roles, e.g., those of the

president and the IR, are radically altered. The IR role becomes pedagogy among peers. The president assures that information flow is unimpeded.

8. Planners should avoid limiting recommendations based on their own perception of the resources likely to become available, because precise prediction of long term resource availability is not possible.

9. Barriers within the existing structure should be razed and levelled. Flexible horizontal connections will then emerge.

There are at least four other logical and pragmatic priors to decentralized planning. First, there must be a willingness on the part of administrators to share power, and to yield to the collective judgment of others. Second, players at all levels of the institution must be competent. Third, a broad-based planning group must be established, and it must consist of the informal leaders across the institution's units. The fourth step is a bit more complicated. Essentially it is the iterative development of mission, values, and vision, and the development of consensus on them, across the entire institution. A caveat applies here: Values must be deeply held and widely shared — they cannot be imported, even though doing so might seem to save time.

The development of mission, and values, (and the entire ongoing process that produces decentralized strategic planning) requires the establishment of wide communication as an institutionalized habit. This is most easily accomplished via electronic mail deluge — all agendas, minutes and drafts of everything are e-mailed to everyone — and every meeting is open. All planning-related e-mail comes with a request for input from everyone. By the time a document is ready for adoption by the institution as a whole, people are generally familiar with some of the issues, and many concerns have been hashed out in meetings. Adoption should be by unanimous or nearly-unanimous vote, sanctifying what everyone had the opportunity to influence and what all or nearly all have already signed off on. What is left of the decentralized planning process is less traumatic when most of the players have already bought

in to documents (mission, values, vision) that define the key points of departure.

How does an institution proceed with the rest of the planning process? The bad news is that a college cannot import planning any more than it can import vision or values. The good news is there is an infinite number of paths an institution might choose. Regardless of the details of implementation, there are some general guidelines. There must be a broad-based planning committee whose focus should be the development and evaluation of strategic direction and strategic themes. There must be functional connections between that committee and the remainder of the institution so the strategic direction and themes that eventually emerge find ample support. There must be functional connections between the committee and the budget planning process — otherwise strategic planning is inevitably a sterile exercise. The budget planning process must be responsive to strategic direction and themes and flexible enough to foster individual initiative. This is very difficult to achieve since the budget planning process is the most rigid process in most institutions. We believe that this rigidity develops out of defensiveness rather than need. Nonetheless defensiveness can be a potent force for resistance to change. There also must be interconnections among the planning committee, the president, and the functional units of the institution, so that the emerging strategic directions augur emerging institutional realities.

Lessons learned

Since 1989, Blue Ridge Community College has been experimenting with a decentralized approach to governance, including planning. We have made some fascinating mistakes, as well as some progress. Our first attempt at a decentralized strategic plan was published in 1991. It was used as a manual for college actions more than it should have been and it lacked an evaluation component. Application of the plan was uneven. Items in the 1991 plan which were mandated by external forces were completed, some effectively and some just well enough to keep external

people off our institutional back. Items for which there was a broad campus consensus typically got done, sometimes with a vengeance. Elements for which there was some agreement, tended to get done in part. Those for which broad-based support was not present, or declined over time, generally did not take place or, once initiated, lost steam over time. We also found, in retrospect, that we had written a very linear, sequential plan. By the time we reached certain parts of the plan, they were out of date or irrelevant.

Based on our admittedly limited experience, we recommend that those about to embark on decentralized strategic planning consider the following ideas.

Carpe Diem—Use opportunities created by resignations, retirements and external mandates to restructure college operations and to influence the culture. Over a period of time, use these changes to inculcate a cultural assumption that change is part of the nature of the institution.

There must be a feedback loop between planners and the administrators who must operationalize strategic themes and actions taken to implement them. Administrators, as well as all other segments of the campus community must be represented in the planning process and must buy in to both the process and the output of strategic planning.

There must be nearly 100% buy-in by top administrators— if they drag their feet, little will happen. The capacity to embrace change is a character trait. Changing character traits is difficult. Therefore, if administrators do not buy in quickly, they need to be outplaced quickly.

Institutions must re-structure and re-engineer in a way that reminds all of the central importance of instruction. For this reason, everyone from top to bottom must assume the role of teacher and innovator. Peer instruction must become the norm, e.g., every administrator should teach at least one course a year; classified staff must be encouraged to teach credit or non-credit courses, to participate in seminars, and to share their ideas with the college; and informal instruction of peers by peers must become the norm.

Traffic patterns do matter. For example, we have moved the Dean of Finance into the student services area. We expect to move other administrative offices out of the "administration building" so they see and are seen by students, faculty, staff and other community members on a routine basis. This is not idle exercise, but crucial if the institution is to enhance communication among segments of the community. For many years we have functioned with a campus-wide open door policy—administrators are seen wandering the halls, and faculty and staff frequent the offices of the president and deans on a continual and informal basis. Social isolation precludes function in a decentralized institution.

Although mostly collaborative, we have found that there is a role for authority. Some decisions will and should float to the top. They range from nominating chairs of committees which have external visibility (e.g., Self-Study, Affirmative Action) to arbitrating squabbles which in a centralized institution would have been settled arbitrarily and at a much lower level. For example, we recently had a major brouhaha regarding hard drives on faculty computers. In a decentralized institution, where computers are how one functions, this debate assumed a significant profile. The president listened patiently, and then ruled on the issue. That ended the controversy with minimal subsequent grumbling—everyone had input before the decision was made.

We have learned not to confuse a checklist of actions with a strategic plan. For example, "hire an instructor to teach writing" is not appropriate, while, "improve the writing of our student population" is.

An example of the dangers of becoming too specific in long range planning is offered by the U. S. Department of Education in its requirements for producing a Title III grant application. Although an institution may receive significant financial assistance through Title III, the money must be designated to very specific tasks as far as five years into the future. Blue Ridge has experienced precisely that scenario. Imagine for instance, laboring mightily to propose the metamorphosis of physical classrooms into electronic classrooms for the year 1998 — by

which time physical electronic classrooms are likely to be obsolete at best, having been replaced by virtual electronic classrooms. Blue Ridge has been fortunate. Understanding that the Department of Education would allow for adjustment, we employed from the beginning a flexible planning structure for the use of federal funds. As a result our Title III project, only in its second year, differs greatly from what was proposed in 1993. The one consistent element is the vision held by the writers of the original application and endorsed campus-wide. The money is being used to reach that broader vision set out in 1993, although how it is applied is adjusted frequently as the environment changes. One can imagine the fate of such projects in institutions who celebrate after receiving the funds then assume the grant application will tell them what to do for the next five years. In short, the temptation which must be avoided in all kinds of long-term planning is to commit to specific actions more than six months in advance of implementation. Strategic direction is what an institution needs, not a manual that tells college personnel what the next step is.

Some people will ask, "What about projects that take more than 6 months to implement?" Our answer is that projects taking more than six months to finish will, at completion, be much different from that which was originally planned — or will be dysfunctional because the context has changed during the implementation period.

Do not even consider decentralized strategic planning without e-mail and a sunshine assumption as a core of the culture. Needed information must get where it needs to be, which is everywhere. And there must be a means of communicating ideas equally, regardless of the source of the ideas — e-mail makes this possible.

Do trust yourselves, favor chaos, resist calls for central control (which are usually made out of worry or fear). The process is like passing a kidney stone—painful, but it generally works out well, without surgery by outside experts.

Revolutionary activities are not uncommon. They tend to require action

by a single individual and usually address personnel issues and the re-organization re-assignment of work. They are saltational, and disjunctive. For example, we have replaced full time employees with part time employees, with work-study students or with nobody. In any case, work was re-assigned, re-designed, or simply not done. The planning committee sets general direction, but it does not decide who does old Bob's work after old Bob has gone to that great centralized institution in the sky.

Internal relationships must be flexible. Extended discussion of whose job that really is, is a warning sign of cultural fracture. A college must foment a general understanding that one's job today is not necessarily one's job tomorrow.

Blue Ridge had two major institutional efforts since the 1991 strategic plan, and each brought its lessons. Our SACS self study was an education in chaos. Administrators stayed out of the game—the committees, including the steering committee were almost entirely composed of faculty and staff. The original plan and vision changed almost weekly. Predictably, committees complained about the absence of administration from the process and demanded that "They need to make some decisions". To their credit, the administration resisted the temptation to step in and thereby reduce anxiety. As a result, there was nearly universal buy-in to the SACS report.

The second major effort was the development of a Title III proposal. This too began with a structured plan that evolved into a chaotic process. People assigned to do specific tasks ended up contributing according to their talents and some dropped from the process over time while others were added. One of the principal writers was not even employed at the school until one year after the process began. Committees did unpredictable things, including sometimes nothing, products were unpolished and late, tempers flared. However, toward the end of the process a group of peers including the president, volunteered their own time to put the package together and it worked. Not only was Blue Ridge fully funded, but the Title III activities are receiving

significant support on campus because everyone had the opportunity to be involved and everybody had the opportunity to proof the drafts.

The above examples do not mean the president was sitting around waiting for things to happen. His role was to provide a shoulder to cry on, to sit patiently while people screamed, and to provide ways to encourage people to work together. In addition, he functioned as a peer worker. Perhaps most importantly, having the broadest scope, he was relied upon to help bring together connections which otherwise would not have been made.

It is important to recognize that leadership emerges in unusual places. Leadership is not confined to those who draw organizational charts. The emergence of nascent leadership depends on the free flow of information which must be dumped out for everyone to see. Different people will grab it and begin to utilize it. Formal leaders, too, have their contributions to make. In general, the role of the president, institutional researcher, and other administrators, must include monitoring the process, detecting gaps and overlaps, providing information and resources, and listening patiently as people try to bring consensus out of chaos. The birth of consensus is often painful, but the newborn has lots of family support.

Obviously what we are suggesting will not be easy. In a decentralized environment nothing is. However, at Blue Ridge we practice what we preach. In addition to the examples cited earlier in the work, last January the planning committee began laying the foundation for producing a new strategic plan. It has been chaos as an art form. We began by creating committees that would produce reports on five general areas effecting our future. Then the committees were not that important, then they were important again but in a different time frame. We decided on a campus-wide retreat after the work was done in November to gain buy-in, then we moved it to August and decided none of the work should be done prior to the retreat. We had endless discussions, arguments and blood baths over what to do at the retreat. We settled on a brainstorming facilitation process with a few facilitators. Then we decided we needed more facilitators and different questions. Memos flew, e-mail abounded,

and tempers were stretched to breaking points.

We stand here before you, one week before our strategic planning retreat. We do not know what will happen but we are confident because as an institution we have trusted ourselves. We will have more than half of our employees marching off to an off-campus site to produce new ideas. We settled on a facilitation process almost everybody is comfortable with. Numerous BRCC employees have been trained to extract ideas which will benefit the college in the future. We don't know what the outcomes will be. We do know that administrators, faculty, the planning committee and many members of the staff are optimistic and are supporting the process. That means that if we produce an effective strategic plan to bring our college into the 21st century, virtually everybody will be on the train.

Is this a realistic approach to running a college? We believe there is no other approach for the 21st century. Two months ago our process seemed dead in the water and real fear had set in. That was normal, even productive. Others stepped up, pitched in where their talents were needed and the process got on track. Yes, there will be those who will remember this as a confused, unorganized process that lacked leadership. However, as BRCC continues to approach major initiatives in this style, and continues to produce quality efforts with wide scale buy-in, we are adding more and more believers to the ranks. We will be carrying the wounded and shooting the stragglers. There will be very few stragglers.

Summary

In this paper we have suggested some radical departures from the normal functioning processes of conservative public institutions of higher learning. If readers are uncomfortable we have accomplished one of our tasks. We believe that as higher education moves toward the 21st century the call for change is urgent. However, it is important that leaders understand this is not a call for episodic change, but rather a call

for cultural change. There is an important difference. While episodic change might shake things up every 10 years, institutions will settle into comfortable patterns and shortly resume business as usual with perhaps, some minor modifications. This has been the pattern of higher education institutions for the last century.

Institutions that succeed in creating an environment of decentralized planning and culture change will be the survivors of the 21st century. If an institution's people cherish a changing environment they will avoid the aperiodic and unsystematic spasms that public institutions are so vulnerable to and which derail the ultimate mission we have—educating and preparing our students, efficiently and effectively.

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